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Alternative fuels quicker fix

By Michael R. Caputo

Gov. Charlie Crist transformed Florida politics last week with his call for offshore oil drilling. Critics of the governor's change of heart say he is cozying up to Sen. John McCain for the vice presidential nod. If so, a McCain/Crist White House could be the most pro-environment in history.

What he did took guts, but in Gov. Crist's move is a glimpse of shift in Republican energy policy — we must dig deeper into domestic oil reserves, but we are obliged to do far more.

For almost two decades, the GOP has had its head in the sand on energy and the environment. In contrast to this and Al Gore's Chicken Little environmentalism, McCain and Crist are conservationists — a mantle worn comfortably by few Republicans since Teddy Roosevelt.

Crist's energy policy realizes Florida is awash in energy resources: sun, wind, water and petroleum. In fact, we have more of all four than most states, so it is particularly confounding to know we tap almost none of it.

Today, when America needs more energy independence, offshore oil drilling cannot continue as the third rail of Sunshine State politics.

McCain has said offshore drilling should be a state decision. If so, Florida should require lessees to fund paradigm-shifting alternative energy development:

Develop solar farms onshore. Already, the state has put \$8.5 million toward a solar panel field at Florida Gulf Coast University to power the entire campus during winter months.

Surround offshore derricks with seaborne wind turbines. With new floating and fixed technologies, 1,000 of these modern windmills could power 4 million Florida homes.

Drive oceanic energy research at our universities. The water temperature difference between the surface and the depths of the ocean can generate power. Today, the technology is stalled without support and capital.

Convert landfills into energy. Natural methane gas produced by one of our 110 active landfills can fuel 1,000 homes. A Gainesville project powers 500 homes. In New Jersey, landfill-to-energy projects are providing power to universities and municipalities.

Developing national domestic oil resources would boost U.S. proven reserves from 11th place to fourth in the world, but won't help consumers for a decade. Alternative energy projects developed by the public-private partnership would provide energy much faster, help accelerate the global move away from oil, and launch Florida into new energy leadership.

A new energy policy must be based on expanding nuclear energy and ending our fossil fuel addiction. We must cut bad energy subsidies and drive pro-competition regulatory reform. Environmental regulations impeding energy innovation and the growth of the solar and wind industries must be erased.

Finally, a McCain administration and governors nationwide must foster the flow of new energy technologies to developing countries through free trade. Florida, in particular, could lead this charge in the hemisphere.

McCain and Crist both support a controversial system where government caps emissions and allows carbon credit trading. While a national proposal died in the Democrats' Congress, Crist's Republican-controlled Legislature green-lighted design of a program here.

Gov. Crist's courage on drilling and cap-and-trade will continue to meet outrage and opposition. Similarly, opponents won't stop deriding McCain's 10-year leadership on the environment. Thankfully, it won't stop either of them.

Teddy Roosevelt once said: "Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em, 'Certainly, I can!' Then get busy and find out how to do it." Some may not like it, but McCain, Crist and a growing number of Floridians believe we should follow Roosevelt's wise words, and get busy.

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